

Chapter 1

Nate held his hand over his eyes as the harsh sun blared, the flare compounding an increasing headache. They'd found their discarded armguards and wandered out of the prison, free of security, to find nobody and nothing. Just the city beating like it was a normal day.

No sign of Charlotte or Xavier.

But he knew it wouldn't be a normal day for him. His heart was pounding, mouth dry like it was stuffed with cotton balls. He touched his forehead and felt dripping sweat.

The drug was working.

"Alright, let's think." Sofia urged, grabbing his arm. "If you die when your heart slows, your adrenal receptors inhibitors, then we just need to keep your adrenaline up. High heart rate. No slowing down, no walking—"

"Until I run out of energy." Nate griped.

"Well, we all know you have plenty of that." She said sarcastically. "What does Isabelle say?"

She's right, Nate. Keep your heart rate high, whatever it takes. Don't stop and think. Keep moving, it's already too low.

Nate blinked rapidly, flexing and unflexing his fingers. The city of Venhold pulsed with busy Lops, bouncing as they started their day. Or finished it. What time was it? The sun was heavy.

It didn't matter.

The main road was a hubbub of beeping horns, rusty people-carrier hoverships trying to scoot past single-man speeders. Some Lops farmer had brought their livestock to town to sell and managed to upturn his truck, so the road was spilled over with the local animals of Lops: clucking bestial red-skinned blood-chickens, cows the sizes of houses and horses with strange bony collarbones, so wide and ridged that they could be used as handle-holds. Increasingly angry citizens booed and yelled.

"Come on." Nate ordered. Isabelle had said he couldn't stop and think, so he broke into a light jog.

Whatever it took to keep his adrenaline up.

"Hey, are you dead in the brain?" One Lops man growled from his speeder at the farmer that blocked him. "Get your animals outta the way, some people gotta work!"

His open-roof two-person coupe had probably been slick and modern ten years ago, wrapped in matte black — and while it had fuse-lar blue lines glowing across the chassis, that chassis had more peeling paint than matte wrap.

“Hey, asshole.” Nate bounced from heel to heel, like a city jogger stopped at a traffic light. “Want to sell your ride?”

The Lops ears perked up along with guy’s eyebrows. “Why the fuck would I want—”

“Suit yourself.” Nate grabbed him by the shoulders and lifted him out of his speeder, tossing him into the dirt road.

“What the fuck—” But Nate was already taken his seat, and Sofia sliding in behind him, looking quite bemused.

“Whoo!” Nate growled as he felt the adrenaline hit his heart. He hit the throttle and wrenched the speeder into full speed. He had to snap-twist the ship around a panicked cow but then he was free, jetting off down the road, dirt kicking behind him.

“Theft really gets you going, huh?” Sofia said from behind him, her throaty voice in his ear.

Isabelle’s voice rang from the ship console. *That worked, keep going like that.*

Nate held the throttle down fully. “Okay, I’ll drive like a madman, you think.” He called behind him.

Sofia shrieked as he narrowly avoided mowing down a pedestrian and then again as he wrenched the ship up to its maximum hover range to fly over a barking dog. “Maybe don’t kill us both!” She yelled.

“I have it under control.” He lied. He felt like he was spiralling, but his heart was pounding with excitement. The drug was fucking him up, his vision tunneling, but things felt more clear than ever. Even knowing he was dying a slow death, he felt invincible.

“Okay, okay!” Sofia took a deep breath. “If you have a poison cocktail in you, some weird black market drug, there’s probably an antidote, some sort of counter we can use to either flush it out or counteract it.”

“Right!” Nate nodded his head eagerly as he accidentally clipped the wooden pole of a market stall, sending the awning crashing down onto the fresh red blood-chicken wraps. “So we need to find a drug-dealer.”

“Yeah, but we haven’t exactly got a local contact here.” Sofia hummed. “Gwen didn’t look like the junkie type, right. Unless you wanted cupcakes or detox smoothies.”

Nate snorted. “You’ve got a real problem with her.”

“Not her, just this...whole planet.” Sofia shivered. “The people are so dissimilar my own, I find it disconcerting.”

“You’ve been running a Council training camp for years, with every type of race.” Nate reminded her.

“Mostly human and Lunari though. And regardless of race, every Council candidate has a similar sort of personality, a drive. People of the same type will congregate towards the same professions, the same environments.”

Nate slapped the control stick. “That’s it! The same environment.” He span the speeder around and darted into a side alley, keeping his neck craned high. He’d seen them the day before, the taverns with the wooden signs with the classic upside down V, strip clubs and brothels.

And where there were whores, there’d be drug dealers. But his heart lurched, his

vision fading a little.

“Sofia!” Isabelle urged from the ship speakers. “His heart rate is lowering again.”

SMACK!

“Ow.” Nate held his red cheek where she’d hit him.

“Sorry.” Sofia didn’t sound sorry at all.

“You need to keep it pumping, Nate. Just riding the same speeder will get boring and your adrenaline will lower.” Isabelle told him.

Nate swore as a club came into view. While the building was made of the same rustic log-and-stone mix of the rest of Venhold, a bunny-eared blonde cavorted in her bra and panties from the second floor balcony. The saloon doors fluttered in the breeze.

“Fuck it.” Nate decided. He held the throttle down harder.

“Nate, shouldn’t we park up—” Sofia’s warning turned into a panicked shriek as Nate kept accelerating. Their speeder careered up the bar-steps, smashed through the doorway, destroying half of the archway. They span into a whirl against the wooden tables, drinks crashing to the floor as customers dove out of the way.

Nate hopped out of the speeder to dead silence. He looked around the large tavern — sunlight doing its best to stream through wooden slats, a poor illumination for the smoke-filled room, packed to the brim with drinking tables, pool tables and poker tables too. A surprisingly clean piano sat in the corner.

The clientele was a mix of less-than-friendly ne'er do wells, pot-bellied alcoholics and a pretty spectrum of Lops working ladies.

Nate held up a single twitching finger. “I need some drugs. Does anyone know—”

“Get this Fed-fuck!” The barman roared and the bar cheered with him.

Nate ducked a punch, his heart pounding so fast it felt like he was having a heart-attack, and slammed his fist into the beer-belly of his attacker.

“Hang on, now! I didn’t mean any disrespect. I’ll pay for any damage—” Nate tried. He ducked a swinging pool cue and winced as it collided on the skull of someone minding their own drink.

Sofia rolled her eyes and kicked a blaster out of a patron’s hand. “No guns.” She chided.

But Nate was having enough trouble even without the tavern’s regulars resorting to firearms. Knuckle-dusters on someone’s fists smacked him so hard they left indents on his cheek. A waitress in little more than a thong stabbed stiletto heels into the back of his calf.

Someone rose from the piano as Nate was tossed against it. He found himself staring up at a giant of a man, tattooed so heavily that his skin was more black than white. “You’re a great pianist.” Nate tried before the huge man picked up and tossed him wholly across the room.

Nate landed on a pool table, face just inches from a pile of white powder. That seemed like a good way to keep his heart rate up — he planted his face in the powder and sniffed as much as he could.

“The fuck is wrong with this dude?” Someone growled.

“Junkies are so sad, man.”

Nate grinned and rolled off the table — he staggered, head awash with fifty different sensations. “I...” He placed a hand on a chair to steady to himself. “Am a Judge of the Council. My word is law.”

“Wow.” The waitress muttered. “Someone’s had way too much.”

He grabbed a red pool ball from the table and threw it at someone charging towards him, knocking him down. Sofia held her hands behind her back innocently and casually tripped up another angry bar patron.

“Stop, stop, stop!” Nate held his hands out. “I’m just looking for a dealer. I’ve been injected with some weird local drug you guys have that slows my heart down, and if I don’t get the antidote, I’m gonna die. So please,” Nate grabbed a pool cue and snapped it in half. “Do not fuck with me today!”

The piano-playing giant rumbled, his eyebrows risen to a hairline that wasn’t there. “You got Alpeco’d?”

“I...what is that?” Nate frowned.

“The drug that inhibits your adrenal receptors, slows your heart rate. Alpeco, it was developed by Lops farmers to keep packs of fangwolves away from our blood-chickens. It’s illegal to kill them so they’d stick syringes on the barbed wire and the wolves would calm down.”

Nate stared with wide eyes. “S-so it wears off?” He wiped some powder from his nose.

The piano man winced. “It wears off on the fangwolves because they are manic little fuckers with two hearts. For a human...you’re as good as dead, brother.”

“There has to be a way to flush it, to get it out of the bloodstream.” Sofia said firmly. Among the smashed up bar, battered speeder smoking up into the ceiling fans, floor splattered with white powder and dropped drinks, Sofia looked even more disparate than ever, dressed as she was in a patched up Voor robe.

The giant shook his head. “It’s not in the bloodstream, lotta people think that. It’s a parasite around the organs, a tar around the heart. The farmers got a special way to get the blood-chickens to piss it out, if they get pricked accidentally. But for a human? No way to get it out, man. Once it’s in, it’s everywhere, slowing your ticker. I’m amazed you’re still standing.”

Nate sniffled — he was more than just standing, he felt manic, pumped full of drugs. But he was running out of ideas.

A siren sounded. Through the window, red and blue lights shone on the wall. The patrons jolted into life, sweeping away drugs or darting into the back entrance.

Nate just shivered.

“I...they’re probably for you, bro.” The piano man grinned toothily, gesturing at the speeder bent into pieces.

“Oh, right.” Nate shook his head.

“You can go out the back or try the rooftops, maybe.” The waitress suggested.

“Nah, I’m on a timer.”

“Nate, wait—”

But waiting was dying. Nate charged out of the front doors of the saloon, swinging his arms left and right like he was preparing for a marathon. Outside, two Lops officers departed a Lops hovercar.

They unholstered hand-blasters as soon as they saw Nate.

“Put your hands up, sir! We will not hesitate to shoot you!”

“I’m a Judge!” Nate tried lamely, trudging towards them.

“Stop moving!”

Izzy?

*Why don’t you ask me for a battle plan *before* you put yourself in a stupid situation?*

She grumbled.

I’ve got like three different drugs in me, sweetheart. You’re lucky I can remember your name.

Nate grinned to himself.

“Sir, what have you ingested?” The younger Lops officer asked, her bunny-ears folding flat to her head. *Please do not resist, you may require medical attention.*

Nate caught sight of himself in the windshield of their hovercar — his face was plastered with white powder, his eyes wide and red, hair stuck to his forehead and dripping with sweat. Not his finest moment.

“I’m fine, clearly.” Nate winked at her. Maybe he could use some of the famous Nate charm.

She looked a little horrified.

“Sir, stop moving, we *will* shoot. Turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

Uh, Izzy?

I’m not a miracle worker, you know.

You always pull miracles out for me.

Oh, fine. Try this.

She played a scenario in his mind.

He turned and presented his back. He slipped and fell into the dirt. The officers rushed him but he threw dirt into their eyes, swept one of their ankles, pulled the gun from their hands to point at the other. A shot in the dust as a warning shot.

Meanwhile, Sofia came out of the tavern to silently dispatch of the remaining officer, choking them out.

In his mind, Nate and Sofia took the enforcement hovercar to escape into the horizon. Nate tried it.

A minute later, he was twitching and sparking as they sped away in the stolen car, saliva dribbling from his lips.

“What the fuck...” Nate moaned, muscles quivering.

“I was not to know they had backup taser weapons.” Isabelle said primly. “That is the fault of your own poor ocular abilities. I can only work with the data I’m given.”

“Whoo-whoo-whoo!” Nate yelled incomprehensibly, his fingers twitching madly.

“What the fuck is going on?” Sofia grabbed the controls as Nate almost turned them into a building.

He simply lay back in his seat, staring out the window as he dribbled. Looking up at the sky as his heart threatened to beat out of his ribcage. Somewhere through the sky above, Ana was coming for him, but he'd be dead before she got here. He could only keep his heart rate up for so long with a life-span reducing amount of drugs, taser electricity and danger.

A shadow stretched over the city as another Lops carrier rose slowly into the sky, a mammoth ship of people looking for a better life. It got him thinking of all the other ships that were leaving the planet — little trader ships, mid-sized agency ships or corporation carriers. One-man passenger speeders.

Charlotte, the President's widow, had done this to him. And she had a high enough profile that she couldn't stay here, couldn't escape notice. She would have left by now surely, to have an alibi when a Judge was found dead on this planet, to return to her media responsibilities, to her family.

Nate's head lolled against the vibrating window. Would she really have left him to die again, unattended, when he'd already escaped certain death once?

No.

Which meant she'd have left someone to ensure he died, just in case something went wrong.

Someone like Xavier.

And if Xavier was still on this planet, then he'd be passing the time. Nate knew him, knew his desperate desire for entertainment, needing adrenaline without the threat of the drug inside Nate's veins.

"Xavi is here, somewhere." He mumbled, holding his chest. "A club, a brothel, an event, something."

Sofia looked over at him but said nothing as she tried to drive from the passenger seat.

"We need to find him." He said flatly. "He'll be in public, drinking, fucking, celebrating."

Sofia paused. "He's smart enough not to draw attention to himself, but his boys? Maybe they'll post something on the local social media."

Nate snapped his fingers. "Yes! We need someone connected to the holonet. A local who knows what's hip and happening."

"Hip and happening?" Sofia snorted. "You're *so* old."

"That's a phrase people use." Nate frowned.

"I...we know someone." Sofia sighed as she took their ship outside of the city.

"Look at you, making new friends." Nate grinned. He felt limp, like a balloon man deflated. He tried to wiggle his toes and realized he couldn't feel them. The colors of the vibrant world outside were becoming desaturated.

"Nate, heart rate." Isabelle warned.

"Fuck." Nate looked around wildly, looking for some way to pump his heart up. The dashboard didn't have any drugs or snuff. No weapons to shoot himself with. Why hadn't he taken the taser they'd shot him with?

Fuck.

The environment was only farmland — nothing exciting, nothing to drive into, nothing to ride.

“Hold on, we can find something at Gwen’s. Maybe we can hook jump cables from her hustler to your nipples.” Sofia said.

Nate laughed then realized she wasn’t joking.

They pulled into Gwen’s farm and Nate slumped from the door. Sofia hooked underneath his arm and helped him to the farmhouse. She kicked in the door to find a wide-eyed Gwenaelle in a vintage sundress and oven-gloves, holding a tray of freshly baked chocolate goodies. An icing syringe lay on the counter, vanilla frosting oozing from the tip.

“Uh, hello?” Gwen squeaked.

“Sorry, Gwen.” Sofia growled as she deposited Nate into a wooden chair. “Gotta use you as a base. Nate’s got Alpeco’d, anything you can use to jump his heart.”

Gwen fretted, fidgeting with entwined fingers. “Alpeco? But that will kill him! He shouldn’t have taken that!”

“Yes, thank you, Gwen.” Nate said through gritted teeth.

“Have you got any drugs? Alcohol? Any of the good stuff?” Sofia barked, yanking open the cupboards of the farm’s country kitchen.

“No, I don’t do any drugs or drink.” Gwen wailed. She lit up. “Umm, I have horse tranquilizer.”

“Good thinking, now go in the exact opposite way.” Nate muttered, head lolling back. Gwen and Sofia were really pretty when they were upside down. Their shapes were getting bigger and smaller, their colors mixing together, like broken eggs in a pan.

“Jump cables?” Sofia asked, swiping her hair out of her eyes.

“N-no!”

“Spare generator?”

“I use renewable resources and solar power—”

“For fuck’s sake,” Sofia smacked her own forehead. “Electro-weapons?”

“No!”

Nate stumbled to his feet. “Kettle.” He said incoherently.

“Yes,” Gwen smiled hesitantly. “Do you want tea? I have nettlebush, fangsnap, red bush, purple bush, mint, black—”

Nate jerked the kettle cord from the power and, with a deep breath, stabbed his finger into the socket. The shock was brutal, brilliant, hissing through his nerves with agonizing pain. But the pain was beautiful, waking him up from the eternal slumber he slipped closer to.

His hair stood up, his body sparking and twitching, the farmhouse lights flickering. When he felt like his heart was going to explode, he pulled his finger out.

The two women were staring at him in something akin to awed horror. Nate wondered if smoke was pouring from his ears.

He looked down and realized he was hard as fuck. Damn, he really wanted to *fuck*.

A thought for later.

“Are...are you okay?” Gwen asked tremulously.

“Loving life.” Nate quipped. “Can I have some chocolate cake?”

“It’s for my holo-content but I’ll cut you a slice...” She trailed off as he dug his hands into the burning hot cake and shoveled it into his mouth.

“We’re having a rough day.” Sofia explained shortly. “We need to find the guy that injected Nate with this drug, to see if we can reverse it. We think he’ll be at a club or somewhere. Is there like an event on today, something VIP?”

Gwen put a plate next to Nate in the vain hope that he’d use it. “I...yeah! There’s a speedrace.”

“A speedrace.” Sofia frowned. “Like, modern speeder ships in a stadium going around in a circle?”

Gwen giggled. “Not quite how we do things down here. We build our own speeders with spare parts and stolen engines. My father used to inject Fuse-lar into our lawn-mower engine. Then we race them in the pit.”

“The pit?”

“Mmm,” Gwen picked up her armguard. “Better to show you.” She flicked across the screen and projected live footage onto the table.

A wild and cheering crowd in a desert. A fifty-foot high burning effigy of a Lops farmer, sickle in hand, being paraded through the crowd, his wooden feet welded to slow hovercars. The flames burned into a sky that was slowly darkening as the sun descended.

And behind that burning effigy, the speeders waited, unlike any Nate had seen. They didn’t have any chassis or frame, their single-man open cockpits were simply hooked up by loose Fuselar-pumping cables, spitting with blue and purple, to the big rumbling engines either far in front or far behind.

The engines spat and hissed with pink sparks, barely enclosed, and even through the zoomed out footage, Nate could make out the amateurish welds and bizarre modifications.

“It is very popular. An event to celebrate the community and innovation of the Lops farmer.” Gwen nodded to herself. She was unlike anyone Nate had ever met — back rigid and straight, perfect posture, a performance to an audience that wouldn’t even see it, until Gwen’s holonet footage bounced slowly across the transmitters from ship to ship as they flew back towards civilization.

It might take weeks before Gwen’s content was seen by her avid viewers — perhaps it wasn’t a performance at all. Perhaps she really was the traditional housewife she sold herself as.

“It seems more like a death race to me.” Sofia said, a blank face turning to a slow smile. “I approve — it has the Voor style of competition.”

“People do die.” Gwen admitted. “But father always said they did their best to make it safe.”

Nate doubted that very much, but he didn’t care unless Xavier was there. “So, is he there?”

Gwen bit her lip as she scrolled through the social media. “What’s he look like? He should stand out if he’s not Lops.”

“Wild hair, tan skin, bit of a dick. Like a big dick face. Like if you imagine a massive dick, then you apply that to a face.” Nate said snidely.

“Ignore him, he’s on a lot of drugs.” Sofia rolled her eyes, peering over Gwen’s shoulder as she swiped.

“Branded areas, corporate areas — I got an invite to make some content with the teams, but my followers wouldn’t approve of me at such a wild place.” Gwen said with a little disappointment. “VIP, here we are. Not him, not them, no, no, no—”

“Why are they all wearing nothing?” Sofia frowned.

“It’s a festival, it’s the aesthetic.” Gwen defended.

“Fishnets and pasties on your nipples is an aesthetic?”

“It’s to commune with nature, with the farmland. We weren’t born clothed. Oh—”

“That’s him!” Sofia exclaimed.

And there he was. Nate clenched his fist as Xavier’s face was projected in front of him. The former Judge candidate clapped in the high balconies of the stands, waiting for the start of the race. His entourage around him, Lops girls under their shoulders, their side tables filled with drinks.

Xavier looked relaxed. Confident.

“I’m going to fucking kill him.” Nate promised.

“Where is this speedrace?” Sofia asked.

“It’s an hour away. There’s a dry desert land towards our fish-traps in the marshes. It’s the only desert we have, really. They say it’s the only place we have where a corporation over-farmed the land, so we have our festival there to honor the independent farmers that keep the land alive.”

Nate was barely listening, holding on to his throbbing head. Had he eaten anything except cake today? He grabbed the icing syringe on the counter and licked the vanilla frosting from it. “Can you take us there?”

Gwen swallowed nervously. “I, yeah, I can. I’ll drive because it’s not on the main road. I can show you where the VIP area is but I—”

“We’ll deal with Xavier ourselves.” Sofia assured her. “But we’d appreciate a lift.” The Voor woman frowned suddenly, tossing her long white hair behind her. “Nate, how are we going to keep your heart rate up for a whole hour?”

Nate grimaced, rubbing the back of his hand sheepishly. “I have an idea but you’re not going to like it...”

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“Is...is this really necessary?” Gwen said, her voice a little high-pitched, her bunny ears standing up as she drove the hustler over the bumpy farm-land. They’d decided to leave the law enforcement hovercar behind — they didn’t want extra attention.

Nate sat on the row behind her, enjoying the wind whistling through his hair.

Enjoying pushing vanilla frosting onto his tongue with Gwen's icing syringe. And the Voor seductress bobbing on his dick, her tongue working around his shaft.

Sofia's knees pressed into the weathered leather beside him, as she cradled his cock and balls with her hands, her patchy Voor robe fluttering in the night wind.

Sofia moaned as he pressed her head down, his cock disappearing further into her throat with every bump of the hustler.

"She needs to keep my heart rate up." Nate grimaced. "She's doing a really good job, yeah, fuck. Yeah, work my balls, such a good little Voor—"

Sofia glared up at him with red eyes, but she slathered his shaft with saliva regardless, working hard to keep him excited.

"This isn't really right—" Gwen eeped as Nate's hand shot out suddenly to grasp the back of her driver's seat, accidentally tangling into her long hair.

"Yes, such a good girl. Nice and sloppy." Nate muttered as Sofia increased her pace, making him push and pull the seat in front of him as she curled her long supernatural tongue around his cock, jerking him off with her tongue as she rose and dropped.

He didn't notice that he was accidentally jerking Gwen back and forth as he pulled at the driver's seat.

The Voor didn't seem to need to breathe, just inhaling his cock into her tight throat and milking him.

She'd been at it for almost an hour already — they'd had to switch positions a few times already, purely to keep it exciting for Nate. A slow blowjob between his legs. Then she lay back on the bench-seat while he fucked her face wildly. Finally, Sofia suckled and bobbed on his cock while Nate reached over to paw at her bubbly ass.

It was a heroic effort. But as the dark sky changed to a red fiery glow, as the roar of a mighty crowd loudened, a natural stadium appearing, seats carved into the mountain, Nate stopped resisting.

"I'm going to c-ah—" Nate unloaded, hips rocking into her wet warm swallowing throat. His left hand clutched a handful of her thick buttock, holding her in place as he filled her stomach. Sofia moaned and gurgled, trying desperately to keep up with his prodigious output.

As they pulled up along a unending line of hover-cars and speeder-ships, Nate sighed in relief as his balls were finally empty.

He stroked Sofia's hair affectionately while he cycled heavy breaths, staring out at the madness in front of them. A huge crowd streaming around the stadium, a carved rock formation that had been holed out to allow access. Around the vast rocks, stalls sold street food and scarves, glowing neon headbands and merchandise for some of the racers.

The crowds were dressed for festival debauchery — guys wore unbuttoned shirts to show chests fit and fat, carrying satchels that were undoubtedly full of drug and drink. The women wore whatever they could get away with, which was anything. Tiny mesh dresses that revealed all the skin beyond, stickers on their nipples to preserve a little modesty. Some wore panties, some didn't bother.

Some wore ass-revealing bodysuits, bouncing happily as their asses sucked in the

little line of fabric, legs either bare or clad in fishnets.

Others went for more of a parade look, shoulder-shawls of pink feathers or man-size wings, with matching panties and stockings.

It was a visual extravaganza, a population let loose.

“Fuck yeah!” A Lops man cheered as he caught sight of Nate and Sofia. “Swallow that dick. Free love, fuck the rules!” The crowd cheered with him, all eyes on Sofia as she pulled off Nate and wiped her mouth.

She ducked her down to the seat, hiding her face, while Nate gave an embarrassed wave.

“I think you can come out now.” He said gently.

“That was humiliating.” Sofia wiped her swollen lips clean of cum and spittle.

“Right? I hope my followers don’t see me.” Gwen’s face was red, ears flat.

“Wait, were people recording?” Sofia squeaked.

“No, they weren’t.” Nate lied — she’d be fine, her head ducked into his lap, but he wasn’t sure if the blood and bruises had made *him* unrecognizable.

They clambered out of the car, Nate stretching luxuriously. He’d needed that. He shook his hands free of the numbness, willing his heart to keep going.

Xavier *had* to have an antidote.

Gwen stared at Sofia with astonishment. “A-are you pregnant?”

Sofia’s stomach was curved out prominently, her Voor robes taut around her stomach. Nate decided not to mention the shimmering streaks on her thighs before she tugged her robe down.

“No, this is just how much seed he produces.” Sofia explained reluctantly. She glared at him. “He’s a freak in many ways, as you can tell.”

Nate grinned in response. His grumpy Gunnery Sergeant.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” He said genuinely. “I needed that. You were a real trooper, to do that for a whole hour.”

“I can hear the condescension in your tone, you know.”

“I...that’s fair.” Nate couldn’t stop smiling. “In my defense, any guy in my position would be feeling too pleased with themselves right now.”

“Maybe we could inject you with something else to keep your smugness down.” She muttered sweetly.

Gwen was distracted, reaching out a hand to trace Sofia’s stomach. “That’s so beautiful.” She murmured.

Nate raised an eyebrow. Maybe the traditional wife thing wasn’t such an act.

They hurried between the large rocks, following the thunderous clamor of the crowds, the excited bluster of the announcer. And, the echoing rumble of the engines.

They reached a railing just in time to look over it at a recessed red-stone tunnel in the land.

“It’s a dried up river bed.” Gwen yelled over the announcer.

“...final lap now, Panka is in the lead but Carlito is right behind. Panka is struggling, his frame is in pieces, his fuse-cables are in flames, but he’s still fast as fuck! But, oh no,

Carlito smacks into him again and Panka's gone!"

Nate blinked as the racers came into view. A pink frame with two flaming pink engines bounced and smacked into some rubble as its hover functionality failed. At such speed, it smacked the ground and bounced up high into the air, an arc of fire silhouetted against the awestruck crowd. Panka hit the ground in a burning fireball as Carlito eased to victory. Fireworks blasted across the sky.

Mechanic crews darted out, carrying water hoses, but they couldn't get close, because the losing racers zoomed by at terrifying speeds. The crowd went silent, solemn, watching and willing for the racer to exit the burning speeder.

Panka never showed.

But the announcer declared the winner, the crowd buzzed and ran to the array of betting stations, and Panka's burning rubble was doused and closed away.

Nate watched with wide eyes, bouncing from foot to foot like a nervous stripper, trying to keep his heart buzzing. "Whoo! Let's get this race on."

"Look, Nate!" Sofia pointed up at the large holo-screens mounted to the cliff face. It panned across the King's face, across the supposedly rich and famous...and then, a little glimpse of Xavier far to the side, downing a beer.

Nate correlated that screen to the stand carved into the red cliffs. The noble stand, wooden railings entwined with golden flowers. They were high above the action, far across the cavernous valley, but he felt like he saw the slightest glimpse of Xavier.

"I have to get up there." Nate clenched his fist.

"I...but how?" Gwen nibbled on her lip.

"The night is yet young!" The announcer roared. "Let's get ready to race, one more time. It's the one you've been waiting for, with our veteran champion, Melios!" A picture of a scowling grizzled man, less threatening with big black bunny ears.

"And...what's this?" The announcer teased. "A prize upon a prize awaits. For the victor wins more than just credits and the acclaim of this great crowd! The winner shall meet the King himself, in the Royal Stand!"

The King nodded regally, waving to the people.

Nate vibrated with excitement, or maybe it was because his heart was threatening to burst from his chest. He'd sniffed a lot of that white powder — he wasn't sure when it was going to wear off. Or what it was.

The speeders lined up in the dried up river bed below, the mechanics working furiously. Strangely, the speeders and engines were covered by satin red curtains as they worked.

He caught sight of a pilot. Carlito, holding a single finger high arrogantly.

He wore a pilot's helmet, one that covered his whole face.

He wore a helmet.

Nate grinned and turned back to the two girls. "I *have* to get in that race. How can I get down to the racers?"

Sofia face-palmed. "Nate, did you not just *see* that guy die, like literally five minutes ago? You've never raced one of these death machines in your life and you snorted like, a

whole kilo of—”

Gwen held a hand up like a school girl. “I, I may be able to help.” She blushed, tugging at her pink dress as it threatened to fall down her shoulders. She was dressed like nobody else here, but all the more beautiful for it. “I was invited to the garages and to do a track walk, to make content, remember?”

“Gwen, I could kiss you.” Nate clutched her arms excitedly.

“Please don’t.” Her rosy cheeks reddened, though she smiled. “I’d like my first kiss to be with my husband.”

“I...” Nate blinked. “Right, yeah. Lead the way.”

An extremely thick blonde walked by in transparent fishnets and nothing else, eagerly tugging at the arm of her much older partner. “Daddy, can we bet on number three to die? His engine is spitting already!”

Nate shared an amused glance with his Voor companion as they followed Gwen down some stone steps.

Sofia sighed as she took hold of his swinging hand, if only to stop him from swinging it like a loon.

“You’re not going to make *me* call you Daddy, are you?” She wrinkled her nose.

Nate hip-bumped her. “I’ll settle for Master.”

“You wish.”

“I do.” He agreed.

“Let’s try and keep you alive first, junkie.” She squeezed his hand. “I don’t want to face Ana when she learns that I let you become a dead drug addict when she was gone for like, a day.”

Nate chuckled. “We’ll face her together, don’t worry. Think I can fit you in those speeders with me? I might need you again, you make me so crazy.”

Sofia looked at him with sultry lidded eyes, lush shock of white hair framing her red lips, the lips that had stretched around his veiny cock only minutes earlier.

The announcer broke the moment as they reached another railing, descending level after level towards the bottom of the riverbed. “Ladies, gentlemen, mighty drinkers, spiraling gamblers, temporary losers, may I have your attention?! The King has spoken!”

His voice dropped into an excited whisper. “He knows that times have been difficult recently. The unrest, the taxation, the food shortages. It pains his heart. Better times are coming and soon, but in the meantime, he wants to give you, the good people, what you’ve been begging for.”

Nate and Sofia looked at each other in amusement as the announcer built the tension, a real awe in his deep voice. “That’s right. On this day, fifty years from when it was outlawed, we have been preparing a special treat for you. The people have spoken and the King listens! The weapons are back, the mines are back, the danger is back!”

The vast holo-screen showed the satin red curtains being stripped from every speeder, revealing the weapons attached to each ship. Missiles, rotating miniguns, plasma mortar arc blasters.

The crowd screamed in delirious delight, faces of disbelief and glee, clapping hands

turning to stomping feet.

Nate's heart thundered to the rhythm of the stomping crowd.

"Well," Sofia leaned closer to shout above the din. "At least you won't have an issue keeping your heart rate up."